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## REVIEWS AND NOTES

ELST, J. VAN DER, "L'ALTERNANCE BINAIRE DANS LE VERS NÉERLANDAIS DU SEIZIÈME SIÈCLE." Groningue, 1920. Pp. 128.

Van der Elst finds that at an early date under the influence of the French renaissance a new form of verse came into vogue in Flanders and in Holland, cultivated, above all others, by Jan van der Noot, Lucas de Heere, Jan van Hout, and Carel van Mander, four poets who wrote during the second half of the sixteenth century. The structure of the Dutch and Flemish verse had been dependent up to that time on the number of stressed syllables, a form which developed out of the old alliterative verse; but by the middle of the sixteenth century, it had already become very defective, and so these poets, being young and full of enthusiasm, endeavored to introduce a new principle of versification, which they borrowed from the French. Henceforth, the total number of syllables in a given verse was to be considered the essential criterion of metrical perfection; simultaneously, the iambic became established, which was erroneously regarded by the adherents of the new movement as the basis of French versification.

The author maintains that the Middle-Netherlandish verse, as a matter of fact, already possessed a pronounced binary rhythm, though the theorists had up to that time not taken account of it, which under certain influences now became so manifest that it was regarded as an innovation. To prove his contention, van Elst presents a large amount of material, in all some forty pages, seeking to establish the natural rhythm of every single line. He admits that his interpretation is subjective, and that competent and unprejudiced scholars may reject his findings in individual instances, but in their totality, he considers them correct.

In his analysis of the different verse forms, van Elst relies wholly on the ear, which organ is the most delicate and, barring the danger of too subjective an interpretation, the most trustworthy instrument for the purpose. Graphic presentations furnish, in his opinion, only a means of control, a check on the results obtained by the auditory method. He has adapted to his investigation the principles advocated by Paul Verrier in his exhaustive *Essai sur les principes de la métrique anglaise*, and in a number of articles published subsequently to the appearance of his larger work. Scansion, van Elst rejects as the most cruel torture to which any form of verse can be possibly subjected; by it, the harmony and the esthetic value of the verse is com-

pletely destroyed, a claim which is only too true. His vehement protest finds, moreover, a natural explanation in the rigidity of the system in vogue in his special field. The scholars and theorists who have dealt with Dutch versification seem to have gone to very great lengths in this respect, and, in their endeavors to classify all possible combinations, they have devised strange feet, to judge by the illustrations, as, for instance the following: "*vriendelijkerē*," and "*dē gēbēnēdijde*." If a verse is read naturally, with due regard for its esthetic character, van Elst holds, we can detect a rhythmic accent, produced by regular segments of time. "Just as music, the verse is based on isochronism of rhythmic intervals." But this regularity is not one of mathematical precision; it exists only for the ear. Even if the disparity of several such rhythmic groups is considerable, our innate tendency towards rhythm fosters the illusion that the intervals are of equal length; and we unconsciously pronounce the longer units more rapidly than the rest to approximate actual equality, be it ever so impossible to really attain it.

Van Elst cites as an illustration the Lord's Prayer, and one must admit that in English, too, one can easily detect a pronounced rhythm, when the Lord's Prayer is solemnly recited. But in music, the intervals are very regular, while in the various verse forms, they are treated with a great deal of freedom. In support of his argument, the author cites some nursery rimes, which, indeed, well illustrate the tendency towards isochronism. Similar instances could probably be adduced in large number from the various Germanic languages. In the region of the Giant Mountains, one surely can find this very day the following lines in use:

"Küchă băckă,  
Strū nēi hăckă,  
Fīnstēr sān  
Ūn kēm Mēnschă 'n Bīssă gān."

Here, the fourth verse has nearly three times as many syllables as the third, but as commonly recited—the third slowly, the fourth as rapidly as possible—the actual difference in time of utterance is greatly reduced, and the illusion of the equality of the intervals is more or less successfully produced. The fact that one never hears these lines pronounced in a different manner results, undoubtedly, from the desire of the children, and the grown-ups as well, for rhythmic movement.

Having defined the principles on which he bases his analytic examination, van Elst proceeds then to formulate his definition of verse foot. "The time interval comprised between two successive rhythmic stresses is called *foot*. The foot is then not a subdivision of the linguistic material, but a duration of time, the beginning and the end of which are characterized by an increase of intensity. This falls generally upon the most

sonorous part of the syllable, that is, the vowel." Following the example of Verrier, van Elst advocates that the vowels bearing the rhythmic stress should be set in heavy type when it is desired to indicate rhythmic accent in print.

It is then the vowels which are the bearers of rhythmic stress. What we commonly designate as sentence stress does not necessarily coincide with the rhythmic accent. The illustrations given by van Elst can, of course, only be checked up by a competent scholar thoroughly familiar with spoken Dutch and Flemish, and even then the subjective element would enter into the appraisal as a weighty factor.

Van Elst distinguishes four principal types of rhythmic feet, according to the relative positions of the stressed and unstressed vowels; the number of the latter may vary widely without altering the rhythmic structure of a given verse. The simpler illustrations given are convincing enough to one fairly familiar with the language; that applies especially to the large number of lyrics analyzed by the author.

In carrying out his investigation, he has read the verses in question aloud, with due regard for their esthetic character, and at the same time, mentally recorded the locations of the rhythmic stress. His method seems open to objection for several reasons. To assure natural delivery, larger sections of a given poem must be read without interruption, it would seem. In strophic poems, the stanza is the logical unit. That means that the reader, who is also the observer, must remember the stressed vowels in the several verses, or else must indicate them immediately on the printed page. Accordingly, one single individual must concentrate simultaneously on the following points: first, upon the natural rendition of the verses; secondly, upon the observation of the acoustic effect produced; and in the third place, upon the retention or the recording of the results obtained. One should think that more reliable results could be obtained by a division of labor, that is to say, if the reading, and the observing and recording, mentally or otherwise, were not carried out by one and the same person. Thereby the danger would also be avoided that the subjective factors in the two processes may produce a cumulative effect. Van Elst admits the difficulty of the task, and it may well be that the several functions can be performed by one and the same individual simultaneously and with reasonable objectiveness and accuracy after considerable practice.

Having defined his aims, terms, and the method employed in his investigation in an introduction covering twenty-six pages, van Elst then devotes fifteen pages, i. e., chapter I, to the presentation of theoretical discussions of metrical questions by the poets and rhetoricians of the first half of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. Chapter II contains 48 pages, of which more than 80% are devoted to the

presentation of illustrative material. One readily agrees with the results which are summed up in but three lines.

"One is forced to arrive at the conclusion: the dissyllabic foot is virtually the rule in the lyric poetry of the Middle-Netherlandish period; it is less common in epic and didactic poetry."

The third chapter is entirely devoted to the refutation of the claim that in French verse there exists, or has existed during the sixteenth century, a regular alternation of accented and unaccented syllables, in other words: a dissyllabic foot. Having disposed of this mistaken view, van Elst seeks to explain in the final chapter how the erroneous belief arose that the iambic measure was borrowed from the French, together with a form of verse in which the total number of syllables was fixed. The most important feature which led to the establishment of the iambic foot in the poetry of the Netherlands was, no doubt, the necessity for agreement between verse stress and musical stress in all poetry intended to be sung to a uniform melody. Formerly, it had been possible in the case of a verse with an irregular number of unstressed syllables to distribute them between the rhythmic, as well as between the musical stresses, the former being sufficiently regular to conform to the tune. The length of the verse now being fixed, it was essential that the natural melody of the spoken verse, i. e., rhythmic accent, should harmonize with the musical measure, a fact which strongly tended towards the establishment of a dissyllabic meter. It was but natural that the phenomenon was more manifest in lyric than in epic and didactic poetry. The conclusions at which van Elst has arrived are, on the whole, convincing; of chief interest to philologists in general is, however, the method of analysis employed by him in his investigation.

In the preface, he expresses his gratitude towards the University of Paris, which graciously accords to the graduates of the several Dutch universities the privilege: "*de couronner leurs études françaises par une thèse, droit que le gouvernement néerlandais ne leur a pas accordé jusqu'à ce jour.*"

We have here a splendid example of a very ingenious diplomatic statement. The facts are, of course, that any Dutch scholar may crown his studies in French with as elaborate a thesis as he can produce; the Dutch government, surely, will not put any obstacles in his way. But, alas, it does not crown the diligent author of such a thesis with the doctoral cap. There lies the rub. *Den Sack schlägt man und den Esel meint man.* Thanks to the liberality of the University of Paris and other French universities, the unreasonable and backward attitude of the Dutch government is not wholly unbearable.

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